

**Academic engagement and agency in  
multilingual middle year classrooms**

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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP**

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of a candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me, and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature of candidate

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## **ABSTRACT**

Student engagement in the middle years of schooling has been a particular concern of teachers and education authorities over the last two decades. Public education systems in OECD countries with ongoing immigration programs are grappling with fundamental issues of classroom engagement in urban schools at the same time that cultural and linguistic diversity is becoming the dominant characteristic of classrooms in these settings. Although student engagement is arguably central to any improvement in students' academic achievement, it is, at best, only a marginal consideration in the design and implementation of education reform initiatives aimed at improving the educational performance of students or the quality of teaching. In the domain of the enacted curriculum, teachers know the practical value of engagement for student learning and motivation, but lack a theoretical framework for understanding and fostering academic engagement in their classrooms. This study, with its focus on the socio-cultural ecology and experience of student engagement in classrooms, develops the conceptual tools needed to advance such teacher knowledge practice.

Despite the sizable and growing socio-cultural literature on the quality of student participation and talk in class communities of practice, the nature and dynamics of student engagement in classroom activity remains largely untheorised. The study therefore explores understandings about the active, socio-cultural nature of engagement in classroom interaction with particular reference to the following questions:

1. What is the nature of and relationship between academic engagement and agency in multilingual classrooms? What is the role of affect in learner engagement and agency?
2. What does student engagement and agency look like within whole class, small group and individual work activity settings? How do they develop over time? What are their sources, objects, dynamics and effects?
3. What classroom contexts, conditions, discourses, tools and practices promote academic engagement and agency in multilingual classrooms? How is this accomplished?

In identifying the features and causal-dynamics of engaged classroom interaction, participation and discourse, the research draws on Vygotskian, post-Vygotskian, sociocultural and activity theories. Key concepts and frameworks developed by Vygotsky around the semiotic structure and formations of consciousness, personality, and the higher mental functions provide the key perspectives for exploring student engagement as a particular form of affective-intellectual-discursive activity in the classroom. Vygotsky's theory of ontogenetic development as the cultural self-mastery of psychological processes by mediational means, in particular, provides a key conceptual tool for investigating academic engagement as a microgenetic sign-mediated process of development.

The study involved collection of participant interaction and other ethnographic data from primary and secondary classrooms in which English as Second Language (ESL) learners, including newly arrived and refugee students, comprised a significant proportion of the class. The teaching programs shaping lesson interaction and the social climate of the classroom were themselves a tool and result of researcher-facilitated 'design experiments' focused on developing and implementing intrinsically-motivating, 'Rich Task' project-oriented learning goals. Ten 'engagement episodes' showing qualities of heightened participation and affect were identified and transcribed from videoed classroom interaction data across whole class, small group and individual instructional settings. Interaction and discourse analysis were used to examine the key features and dynamics of the episodes. Macro and micro-level socio-cultural processes shaping each episode were also considered in relation to a proposed cultural ecology framework.

The study finds that academic engagement is a form of situated semiotic agency arising from sign-mediated activity, at the heart of which lies a dialectic experiencing of sense and abstraction. Learner engagement is also mediated (stimulated, sustained and developed) by a semiotic eco-system, or situated synergy, of goal, role, tool, and rule subsystems. The study therefore provides a situated sociocultural account of the formation of academic engagement

and agency in multilingual classrooms as well as a grounded model of the sociocultural formation of classroom learning communities.

The research addresses fundamental issues of intellectual, social and discursive participation in socially disadvantaged classrooms as well as teacher aspirations for self-regulated, self-directed student learning. It has implications for designing and developing pedagogy that engages the full range of learners in intellectually challenging classrooms and for creating an inclusive curriculum for culturally and linguistically diverse learners in the middle years of schooling and beyond.

